VZCZCXRO5133
PP RUEHAG RUEHROV
DE RUEHDM #0345/01 1361213
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 151213Z MAY 08
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4977
INFO RUEHXK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUMICEA/USCENTCOM INTEL CEN MACDILL AFB FL
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0399

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 000345

SIPDIS

PARIS FOR JORDAN; LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/14/2018
TAGS: KDEM PGOV PHUM PREL SY
SUBJECT: SYRIAN REGIME CONTROL OF INTERNET MORE VARIED,
SOPHISTICATED THAN COMMONLY THOUGHT

REF: 05 DAMASCUS 1923

Classified By: CDA Michael H. Corbin for reasons 1.4 b and d

1.(SBU) Summary: The rapid spread of the internet in Syria
has presented the SARG with both challenges and
opportunities. The regime,s first reaction was to exact a
level of control over what could be seen on internet. When
merely blocking sites proved to be increasingly ineffectual,
the regime switched to a mixture of blocking websites and
monitoring users. In addition, the SARG has used the
internet as a tool to promote its own propaganda. In spite
of the SARG's active interference, today, the average Syrian
citizen can access a wider array of information than ever
before over the internet. Yet, skeptics argue that the
watchful eye of the security services has prevented
anti-regime web-based content, whether it is pro-democracy or
Islamist, from creating a critical mass of public opinion
that would lead Syrians to pressure their government for
change. End Summary.

BACKGROUND

2.(C) On August 12, 2000, the Syrian Computer Society (SCS)
established the country's first Internet Service Provider
(ISP). Since that time, there has been an ongoing
proliferation of users resulting in a concomitant explosion
of internet cafes news sites and blogs. By 2007, there were
an estimated one million internet users in Syria, or a little
over five percent of the population, whereas there were fewer
than 200,000 users in just 2005 (reftel). The rise in Syrian
internet users is expected to continue to an estimated 1.7
million in 2009, according to a recent study by the
Jordan-based Arab Advisors Group. According to the president
of the IT-based Inana Group Firas Bakour, there are
3,000-4,000 new subscribers per month. SyriaTel began to
introduce wireless internet service in homes on a limited
basis in 2007. Many internet cafes also have Wi-fi hotspots.
 (Note: Wireless internet may prove to be an effective means
through which the USG could develop civil society programs as
it is harder for the regime to identify users when they can
change their location easily.)

¶3. (C) Many credit President Bashar al-Asad, who headed the
SCS and reportedly is a computer enthusiast, with the initial
blossoming of the internet in Syria. Some outside the
regime, such as National Organization for Human Rights in
Syria (NOHR-S) President Ammar Qurabi, insist, however, that
the regime has merely tried to take credit for the
internet,s inevitable arrival in an attempt to portray Asad
as a man of science and technology. Regardless of the

catalyst, the government's willingness to allow the internet to grow in Syria is at least in part due to the fact that the vast majority of users in Syria are interested in non-political items such as sports and entertainment. Nonetheless, the regime remains concerned with opposition content of all stripes on the web.

BLOCKING SITES

4.(C) One way the government controls internet usage is to block sites. According to the one-time head of the Damascus branch of the SCS, Marwan Zabibi, the security services have sought to extend their control over what could be viewed over the web since the early days of the internet in Syria by requiring private ISPs to block certain sites (reftel). Blocking access to some websites appeared to be confirmed as official SARG policy when on July 8, 2007 Minister of Information Mohsen Bilal stressed the necessity of prohibiting some internet access in an interview with al-Jazeera stating that some people "abuse" websites. The next day, government appeared to define "abuse" as the spread of Jihadism and sympathy for the Lebanese March 14 movement. On July 9, 2007 NOHR-S reported that the Syrian government had blocked access to the website of the Beirut newspaper al-Mustaqbal, which is run by the family of assassinated Lebanese ex-premier Rafik Hariri, and several radical Islamist websites. The trend continued through late 2007 with many well-known sites blocked such as Ayman Abdul Nour's ALL4SYRIA and that of Lebanese daily Al-Nahar. The SARG also

blocks many popular websites like Amazon and YouTube.

¶5. (U) One incident that has drawn a great deal of attention within the country lately was the regime,s decision on November 15, 2007 to block the social networking website facebook.com. (Note: Official explanations stipulated that the site was blocked because a spam campaign consisting of profane posts against President Asad and his wife as well as pro-Israel slogans appeared on the Syria network's message board. Other commentators have speculated, however, that the regime had become increasingly concerned about Facebook's potential to create a virtual civil society.) To date, the site remains blocked. Yet, despite the regime,s best efforts many Syrians are still able to access facebook.com through a variety of methods, according to embassy contacts. In fact, Facebook continues to have a Syria Network space where somebody is still posting local events.

¶6. (C) Syrians have proved to be remarkably savvy at accessing blocked internet sites in general, according to Maan Abdul Salaam, a pro-democracy activist who focuses on women,s issues, and Messud Akko, a Kurdish activist and free lance journalist. Specifically, young Syrians constantly change the internet addresses and proxies of their sites, download software that allows them to view restricted websites, and disguise their own identity while on line. Another technique used by Syrian web surfers to access sites blocked by the Syrian government is to make a connection with a Lebanese or Jordanian server through a long distance phone call. Moreover, most locally sold PCs come pre-installed with Syrian produced "cracking and hacking" software tools, according to local observers.

¶7. (SBU) Evidence that Syrians can find ways around the regime,s internet blocking efforts can be found around the internet cafes of Damascus. From summer of 2007 until May 2008, Poloff has made sporadic visits to a number of internet cafes around Damascus. These site visits revealed most internet cafs offered little if any access to websites that the regime believed to be dangerous. One notable exception, however, was a caf called Yahoo.Net across the street from Damascus University in the Baramkeh district of Damascus. On three separate occasions, Polloff was able to access many

blogs, chatrooms and websites that were reportedly blocked,
such as All4Syria, al-Mustaqbal, the Damascus Declaration
website as well as Kurdish, Islamist and Syrian human rights
websites.

MONITORING USERS

¶8. (C) Due to Syrian on-line users' success in finding ways
around regime blocking of popular websites, a far more
effective tool for the regime is to keep a close eye on
internet usage. In its 2007 report, Reporters without
Borders listed Syria as the biggest prison for
cyber-dissidents in the Middle East. Representatives of
Cisco also told Post that all new Syrian internet tenders
require bidders to build in a mechanism through which the
security services can monitor transmissions.

¶9. (C) In addition, anecdotal reports indicate that internet
cafs and chat rooms are now extremely dangerous places to
view anything politically sensitive. Some Embassy contacts
have reported that Syrians are now required to present their
national identification card at internet cafs before being
allowed to log on. Regional media reported that enforcement
of this regulation was stepped up in March 2008. As of May
2008, however, some local contacts said that internet cafes
do not check every user's identification. These claims were
backed up by recent firsthand site visits where Poloff
witnessed users entering internet cafes and logging on to
work stations without presenting identification. In fact,
only about half of the internet cafs Poloff visited required
him to produce any identification.

¶10. (C) Human rights lawyer and internet commentator, Rezan
Zeitunah, told poloff that owners of internet cafs can
monitor the activity of all customers and in many cases will
not hesitate to notify authorities if customers view
politically sensitive material. To back up her claim,
Zeitunah related an incident in January 2007 when two young
men forwarded an email with political content in it. Thirty

DAMASCUS 00000345 003 OF 003

minutes later, security services arrived and asked the two
men to leave with them quietly. During a site visit in May
of 2008, Poloff witnessed a plainclothes internal security
agent approach and, after identifying himself as a State
Security agent, question the internet caf proprietor.

¶11. (C) Furthermore, Akko asserted that many Syrians have
been arrested for participating in internet chat rooms and
have been held from three months to three years. On May 14,
2008, Tarek Bayassi, a 24-year-old Syrian blogger, was
convicted and sentenced to three years for surfing internet
sites of Syrian opposition groups and posting comments
online. Of course, monitoring of private email is nothing
new in Syria. As far back as 2001 the SARG imprisoned for
five months a Damascene business woman and hotelier, May
Mamar Bashi, for forwarding to a friend on her private email
account a political cartoon of President Asad sodomizing
Lebanese President Lahoud.

THE INTERNET AS PROPAGANDA TOOL

¶12. (C) These days, the SARG,s monitoring of the internet
goes beyond the more traditional aims of maintaining tight
social control. Rather, the regime has become an active
player in the information wars in cyberspace. According to a
French diplomat, the Ministry of Information has a section
that monitors the internet for everything written about
Syria. The SARG will then use Syrian news websites which the
security services tightly control to put out news stories
that support the regime,s spin and discredit its critics.
For instance, SyriaNews is widely believed to have close

links with General Security Directorate chief Ali Mamluk.
SyriaLive is thought to be connected to Asif Shawkat, head of
the security services and brother-in-law to President Asad.
(Note: SyriaLive was shut down in November 2007, which many
local commentators believe is evidence of the rivalry between
the security services being played out on the internet.)

CONSEQUENCES FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

¶13. (C) Embassy contacts who use the internet extensively for
their civil society activities are divided over the impact
and meaning behind the SARG,s internet monitoring. Maan
Abdul Salaam, a civil society activist who publishes an
on-line magazine focused on women's issues, discounts the
impact of the relatively increased freedom in Syrian
cyberspace saying that the regime has the ability to monitor
any cyber-exchange of ideas in Syria, making the internet in
Syria the antithesis of a place where ideas can be exchanged
freely. On the other hand, Zeitunah asserts that with the
spread of the internet organizations like hers, can reach a
much wider audience by posting reports on her website or
sending announcements via email. It should be noted,
however, that: a) the spread of the internet has given the
SARG another avenue through which it can spread its
propaganda and denounce its opponents; and b) the majority of
internet users in Syria prefer to use the internet for
entertainment and leisure instead of news.

¶14. (C) Comment: Despite government restrictions, the
internet has continued to spread in Syria - indicating
Syrians, desire to access outside information. As such, the
internet serves as another porthole to the world, which is
significant in a country like Syria that has been closed to
the outside world for so long. It is also true that human
rights and civil society groups have benefited from the
internet especially in terms of their public outreach. At
the same time, most internet users focus on non-political
websites. Moreover, the regime carefully monitors internet
use and actively uses the internet to spread propaganda and
attack its detractors. On balance, the net effects of the
spread of the internet in Syria are most likely positive, yet
one should not count on the spread of the internet alone to
be an agent of change in Syria.
CORBIN